

WINNING HEARTS AND MINDS

The Theory and Fallacies of Counterinsurgency

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From the beginning, the core of the tragedy in Southeast Asia has been the inability of Western political leaders, and particularly American political leaders, to grasp the nature of insurgency in areas formerly under colonial rule, or the limitations of counterinsurgency to quell it. Accordingly, The Nation is devoting almost this entire issue to Eqbal Ahmad's essay on the subject. In somewhat different form it will be a chapter in his forthcoming Reaction and Revolution in the Third World (Pantheon). Mr. Ahmad is a Fellow of the Adlai Stevenson Institute in Chicago.

To write on counterinsurgency one must first explain what the so-called "insurgencies" really are. In the United States that may be difficult because for the most part the social scientists who write on revolutionary warfare have been proponents of counterinsurgency. As a result, the biases of incumbents are built into the structure, images and language of contemporary Western, especially American, literature on the subject. We have come to accept ideologically contrived concepts and words as objective descriptions.

One could take innumerable examples—terrorism, subversion, pacification, urbanization, protective reaction, defensive interdiction, etc.—and expose the realities behind these words and phrases. The term counterinsurgency is itself an excellent example. Like all coinages in this area, it is value-laden and misleading. In fact, counterinsurgency is not at all directed against insurgency, which Webster defines as "a revolt against a government, not reaching the proportions of an organized revolution; and not recognized as belligerency." The truth is, the Congress and the country would be in uproar if the government were to claim that U.S. counterinsurgency capabilities could conceivably be available to its clients for putting down "revolts not reaching the proportions of an organized revolution." The truth is the opposite: counterinsurgency is a multifaceted assault against organized revolutions. The euphemism is not used by accident, nor from ignorance. It serves to conceal the reality of a foreign policy dedicated to combating revolutions abroad; it helps to relegate revolutionaries to the status of outlaws. The reduction of a revolution to mere insurgency is also an implicit denial of its legitimacy. In this article, counterinsurgency and counterrevolution are used interchangeably.

Analytically, counterinsurgency may be discussed in terms of two primary models—the conventional-establishment and the liberal-reformist; and two ancillary models—the punitive-militarist and the technological-attributive. I term these latter ancillary because they develop after the fact—from actual involvement in counterrevolution, and from interplay between the conventional and liberal institutions and individuals so involved. The models, though identifiable in terms of the intensity and

scope of their application at given times, and in terms of the agencies and individuals favoring them, are operationally integrated in the field. I outline them here:

Although monolithic in its goal of suppressing revolutions, the theory and practice of counterinsurgency reflects the pluralism of the Western societies to which most of its practitioners and all of its theoreticians belong. A pluralistic, bargaining political culture induces an institutionalized compulsion to compromise. Within a defined boundary, there can be something for everyone. Hence, the actual strategy and tactics of counterinsurgency reflect compromise, no one blueprint being applied in its original, unadulterated form. This give-and-take contributes to a most fateful phenomenon of counterrevolutionary involvement: groups and individuals continue to feel that their particular prescriptions were never administered in full dosage and at the right intervals. They show a tendency toward self-justification, a craving to continue with and improve their formulas for success. Severe critics of specific "blunders" and "miscalculations," they still persist in seeing "light at the end of the tunnel." I shall return to this in discussing the Doctrine of Permanent Counterinsurgency.

Set Battles; 'Liberal' Doctrine

We might view the conventional-establishment approach as constituting the common denominator of the assumptions and objectives shared by all incumbents; viz., an *a priori* hostility toward revolution, the view that its origins are conspiratorial, a managerial attitude toward it as a problem, and a technocratic-military approach to its solution. In strategy and tactics, this approach prefers conventional ground and air operations, requiring large deployments of troops, search-and-destroy missions (also called "mop-up operations"), the tactics of "encirclement" and "attrition"—which involve, on the one hand, large military fortifications (bases, enclaves) connected by "mobile" battalions (in Vietnam, helicopter-borne troops and air cavalry); and, on the other hand, massive displacement of civilian population and the creation of free-fire zones. The conventionalists also evince deep longings for set battles, and would multiply the occasions by forcing, surprising or luring the guerrillas into conventional showdowns. The results of these pressures are bombings (e.g., North Vietnam) or invasion of enemy "sanctuaries" across the frontiers of conflict (e.g., Cambodia) and the tactic of offering an occasional bait in the hope of luring the enemy to a concentrated attack (e.g., Dienbienphu, Khe Sanh).

If the conventional-establishment attitudes constitute the lowest common denominator of counterrevolution, the liberal-reformists are the chief exponents of its doctrine, and the most sophisticated programmers of its practice. They provide the core of the policies specifically associated